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## COMMUNALISM

### The chains of Pirana

DIONNE BUNSHA  
*in Pirana*

**A Gujarat village that follows a Sufi-inspired faith, a blend of Islam and Hinduism, is in danger of being swamped by Hindu fundamentalism.**

PICTURES: BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



**The Pir Imam Shah Bawa dargah.**

PIR IMAM SHAH BAWA's devotees are chained at the feet. They close their eyes and pray fervently while walking towards the Sufi saint's tomb, the Hajrat Pir Imam Shah Bawa Roza, in Pirana village, outside Ahmedabad. If the chain disengages in the first few steps, it means that your prayer will be granted soon. If not, it is a sign that it will take some time. Today, the Pir's followers are entangled in a dispute that could threaten the existence of their faith. realpatidar.com

Residents of Pirana still follow Imam Shah Bawa's teachings of love and harmony, a Sufi-inspired amalgam of Islam and Hinduism. But powerful religious heads close to the Sangh Parivar are trying to communalise their belief, reducing it to little more than a sect of Hinduism.



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## COMMUNALISM

### The chains of Pirana

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**A Gujarat village that follows a Sufi-inspired faith, a blend of Islam and Hinduism, is in danger of being swamped by Hindu fundamentalism.**

PICTURES: BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Imam Shah  
Bawa's Kabar /  
Dargah  
ઈમામ શાહ બાવાની  
કબર / દરગાહ

Dholia - Imam Shah's  
Bed Room  
ઢોલિયા - ઈમામ શાહનો  
બેડ રૂમ

Imam Shah's Descendent's  
Kabar / Dargah  
ઈમામ શાહ બાવાના વંશજની  
કબરઓ / દરગાહ

**The Pir Imam Shah Bawa dargah.**

કબર / દરગાહ

PIR IMAM SHAH BAWA's devotees are chained at the feet. They close their eyes and pray fervently while walking towards the Sufi saint's tomb, the Hajr at Pir Imam Shah Bawa Roza, in Pirana village, outside Ahmedabad. If the chain disentangles in the first few steps, it means that your prayer will be granted soon. If not, it is a sign that it will take some time. Today, the Pir's followers are entangled in a dispute that could threaten the existence of their faith.

Residents of Pirana still follow Imam Shah Bawa's teachings of love and harmony, a Sufi-inspired amalgam of Islam and Hinduism. But powerful religious heads close to the Sangh Parivar are trying to communalise their belief, reducing it to little more than a sect of Hinduism.

આહી મૃતકના (ખાસ  
કન્બીઓના) હાડકાઓ  
દાટેલા છે અને હવે  
આ જગ્યા હાડકાઓથી  
ભરાઈ ગઈ છે.

Dul Dul, the horse. This element is as per Satpanth doctrine. Nothing to do with Hinduism.  
દલ દલ ઘોડો - આ સતપંથ ધર્મનું એક તત્વ છે. હિંદુ ધર્મ સાથે કોઈ સંબંધ નથી



**Dholia, the "bedroom" of Imam, redecorated with pictures of Hindu gods.**

As per Islamic Values; No Idol is placed, hence only pictures of Gods.  
Majority of Hindus (except Arya Samaj) follow Idol worship.  
Arya Samaj does not believe in pictures also. It believes only in Yagya (Holy Fire).  
ઇસ્લામમાં મૂર્તિ પૂજા વર્જિત છે. તે પ્રમાણે કોઈ મૂર્તિ નથી રાખી, ફક્ત ભગવાનના ચિત્ર રાખ્યા છે. હિંદુઓ (આર્ય સમાજ શિવાય) મૂર્તિ પૂજામાં મને છે. આર્ય સમાજ ચિત્રોને પણ નથી માનતી, ફક્ત યજ્ઞમાં મને છે.

**Imam Shah's hand written Koran.**  
ઈમામ શાહ હસ્ત

In the heat of the conflict, the Koran, handwritten by the Pir, which used to lie near his tomb, mysteriously disappeared. Pir Imam Shah Bawa is believed to have founded the *Satpanth* (true path) faith around 600 years ago. He taught tolerance and the universality of religions.

The sect is an offshoot of Ismaili teachings, a liberal branch of Shiite Islam followed by the Agga Khani Khojas, and it attracted devotees from religions other than Hinduism and Islam too. All 18 communities living in Pirana village, belonging to different castes and religions, are devotees of Imam Shah Bawa.

**An Ismaili Sect, which is part of Shia Muslim.**  
શિયા મુસલમાન નો એક પંથ

The shrine also attracts followers from different parts of India. Hindu followers, called 'Satpanthis', comprise 85 per cent of the sect. Several of them are from the Kutchi Patel community. Muslim followers, called 'Saiyeds', are considered to be the saint's direct descendents. The Pir's devotees did not define themselves as Hindu or Muslim until they were forced to do so by the British Census in the mid-19th century. The pressure of Islamic reforms and the rise of Hindu revivalist groups also made them adopt clearly defined religious identities.



**A barbed wire fence put up by the Satpanthi dargah**

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સતપંથી દર્ગાહ



**Dholia: Imam Shah Bawa's Bedroom.**  
 ઢોલિયાળ ઈમામ શાહ  
 નો બેડ રૂમ (શયન કક્ષ)

**Dholia: Masjid and Graveyard.**  
 ઢોલિયા: એક એવી  
 જગ્યા જ્યાં ઈમામ  
 શાહ સૂતાં હતા, એક  
 મસ્જિદ અને કબરસ્થાન

### administration to separate the Pir's tomb from the masjid.

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After the death of the saint, a shrine was built over Imam Shah Bawa's tomb. Within the complex, they also built a Dholia at the spot where he used to sleep, a mosque and a graveyard. **Until 1931, the complex was a private property belonging to the Saiyeds, and was administrated by the head of the Satpanthis called 'Kaka',** according to an article by researcher Dominique Sila-Khan. Some Satpanthis filed a case against the then Kaka Ramji Laxman (a Kutchi Patel) for misusing funds.

Property belongs to Saiyeds. Satpanthis only administer it.  
 જગ્યાના માલિક સૈયદો  
 છે, ફક્ત વહીવટ  
 સતપંથીઓને  
 આપવામાં આવ્યો છે.

**The court ordered that a public trust be set up to manage the property.** The trust was to consist of seven Satpanthi and three Saiyed representatives elected every five years. But elections to the trust have not been held for the past 15 years. A conflict between the Satpanthis and the Saiyeds emerged when the last religious leader Karsan Das Kaka tried to Hinduise the belief. The dispute has resulted in a spate of legal battles.

**Books were changed by Karsan Kaka.**  
 કરસન કાકાએ ધાર્મિક

**IN the late 1980s, the Kaka made several changes to the literature, rituals and prayers, removing any hint of Islamic influence.** When this writer visited the shrine, the guide appointed by the trust made it a point to keep telling her, "This is a Hindu samadhi mandir. It has no connection with Islam." "Our prayers had words like Om as well as Rehman and Rahim."

**Real Satpanth Values are destroyed.**  
 સતપંથના અસલી  
 મૂલ્યોને નષ્ટ કરી  
 નાખ્યા

**"The shrine administration has taken out the Islamic words. They are destroying the meaning of the philosophy,"** said Bharat Patel, a carpenter who lives in Pirana. He is also a Satpanthi, but resents the hijacking of the sect by a few powerful Kutchi Patels. "They are like a gang. It has become very political. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Bajrang Dal and the police are with them. Anyone who questions them is taken to the police station. **There is no meaning to the Satpanth anymore.** It has become very casteist. In the gurukul, they only look after the children of Kutchi Patels, not others. I used to go to the shrine everyday. But since they have destroyed it all, I don't go there. We don't get any respect," says Bharat Patel.

સતપંથનો હવે કોઈ અર્થ નથી

In the post-Babri Masjid demolition fervour, the VHP allied with Karsan Kaka and the trustees to arrange a huge Sadhu Sammelan inside the dargah complex in 1993. **They pledged to 're-convert' to Hinduism and change the shrine into a temple. The dargah was re-named 'Prerna Pith' or 'samadhi mandir'.**

**Sadhu Sammelan: Pledged to Re-convert to Hinduism.** That means at present they are not Hindus. This means Sadhus know that Satpanth is not a hindu sect, nor there is a temple there.  
 સાધુ સમ્મેલન: હિંદુ ધર્મ  
 અંગીકાર કરવાનો વાચદો આપેલો  
 હતો. એટલે સાધુઓ જાણે છે કે  
 સતપંથ હિંદુ ધર્મ નથી અને ત્યાં  
 મંદિર નથી.

**Dargah is renamed as Prerna Pith or Samadhi Mandir.**  
 દરગાહનું નામ બદલીને  
 પ્રેરણા પીઠ અને સમાધી  
 મંદિર રાખવામાં આવ્યું.

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**The graveyard within the Pir Imam Shah Bawa dargah complex. Muslim devotees say that coconut trees have been planted at the spot to prevent them from using it as a burial site.**

**Graveyard**  
પીરાણાનું ઈમામ શાહ  
દરગાહ નું કબ્રસ્થાન

**"Kaka" is renamed to "Maharaj" and "Acharya"**  
"કાકા" નું નામ બદલીને  
"મહારાજ" અને "આચાર્ય"  
રાખવામાં આવ્યું.

The Kaka discarded his old title and re-appointed himself 'Maharaj' and 'Acharya'. The trust cut off water and electricity supply to the masjid, saying that it was not part of the dargah complex. The 'Om' symbol was painted all over the shrine. The Dholia was renovated with pictures of Hindu gods. The communal violence of 2002 further emboldened the VHP. Led by Bajrang Dal leader Babu Bajrangji, an accused in the Naroda Patiya massacre (the worst massacre murder in Gujarat), they stopped the traditional Tazia procession from the masjid to the dargah on the day of Moharram in January 2003.

**"Tazia" an Islamic rituals is practiced.**  
તાઝિયા, એક ઇસ્લામી  
તત્વ, પાળતો

Both Hindu and Muslim devotees participate in this procession. A barbed wire fence was built separating the masjid from the dargah. Two entrances to the dargah were sealed off. "In our village, there is no discrimination. Only they are creating it within the shrine," said Chandrakant Patel, a Pirana resident from the Kutchi Patel community. "We used to pray at both the masjid and the dargah. After they put up the fence, it has become difficult to walk across and pray in both. They blocked the route of the Tazia procession. Hindus and Muslims have not done Tazia for two years. They are doing this to harass us. They want to cut off the Saiyeds totally and gain full control."

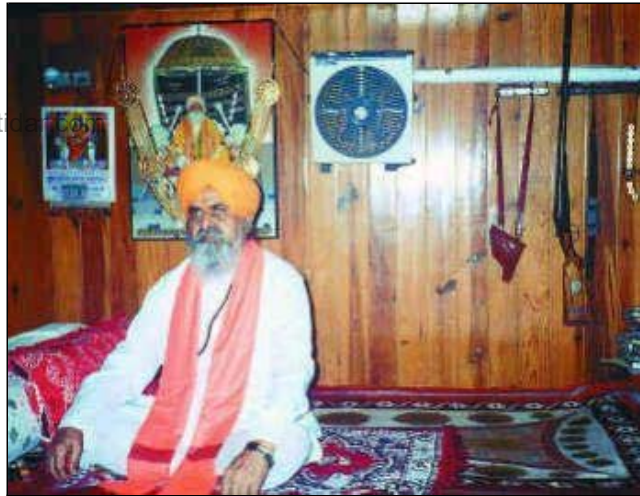
**Koran, used to be kept near the tomb.**  
ઈમામ શાહના કબર  
પાસે કુરાન રાખવામાં  
આવતી.

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Two copies of the Koran placed near the Pir's tomb mysteriously disappeared. One of them was handwritten by Imam Shah Bawa. Other Islamic books lying near the tomb were also removed. A wooden box with silver used during the Moharram procession also disappeared. Framed copies of a farman, a document from King Aurangzeb donating 45 acres of land and money to the trust, also vanished. The original copy of this document is written on a silver plate, which is in the trust's possession. The 50-year-old tomb of Saiyed Taskdukhusain, a trustee, located near the dargah, was

**Aurangzeb donated 45 Acres of land and money.**  
ઔરંગઝેબે ૪૫ એકર  
જમીન અને પૈસાનું દાન  
આપેલ છે.

demolished completely.



**The religious head of Satpanthis, Nanakdas Kaka, who calls himself Guru Maharaj Jagatguru Satpanth Acharya.**

Ironically, Saiyeds in Pirana who filed a case against the disappearance of these treasures were arrested for looting and sent to the Sabarmati Central Jail. What did they loot? Prasad from the temple - jaggery, sugar and coconuts. Every day, offerings from the dargah are supposed to be given to the Saiyeds. It is an old custom. But in 1998, the administration stopped the practice, in a move to further isolate the Saiyeds.

After an argument, they got the Saiyeds arrested for armed robbery. The present religious head, known as Nanakdas Kaka, who calls himself Guru Maharaj Jagatguru Satpanth Acharya, denied that the missing documents or monuments ever existed. He told *Frontline* that the Satpanthi faith was a 'Vedic religion', which had followers from various communities. When this writer asked him whether the shrine was a dargah or a mandir, he said, "Muslim followers call it dargah. It is a difference in language. But all donations are given by Hindus, not Muslims."

The dargah administration is adamant about discarding its 600-year-old history. But many devotees would not let them forget the past. It would take a miracle to free the chains now binding Imam Shah Bawa's followers.

**Offerings from Dargah are for Saiyeds.**

દરગાહને મળેલ ચડવા ને ભેટો સૈયદો માટે

**600 year old history is being tried to change.**

હાલનું દરગાહનું પ્રશાસન, દરગાહનું ૬૦૦ વર્ષ જુનો ઇતિહાસ બદલવા પાછળ જનૂની બની છે.

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